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FM AMEMBASSY KUWAIT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8401  
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0816  
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO PRIORITY 1020  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1360  
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY  
RUEHKU/OMC-K KUWAIT KU PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000295

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

STATE FOR AIAG, NEA/ARP, NEA/RA; CAIRO FOR LINDA LOGAN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: AMED CASC KSCA SENV TBIO KU

SUBJECT: AVIAN FLU SITREP NO.2: 7 NEW CASES REPORTED;  
HEALTH MINISTRY CONSIDERS SITUATION UNDER CONTROL

REF: A. KUWAIT 285

1B. KUWAIT 258  
1C. KUWAIT 290

11. (SBU) Summary: Emboffs and ARCENT Medical officers met with Kuwait's Director of Public Health on 28 February to discuss the latest on the avian flu outbreak in Kuwait. The number of confirmed cases in Kuwaiti birds as of 1200 GMT on 28 February is 39. No cases have been reported on commercial farms but the GOK has banned the sale of live poultry for the next three months. All humans known to have come into contact with infected birds (84 individuals) have tested negative and are receiving Tamiflu as a precautionary measure. The Kuwaiti Ministry of Health (MOH) is loosely coordinating GOK efforts, which are largely being led by the Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources (PAAAFR). MOH issued a number of helpful Public Health Announcements. No new restrictions/procedures have been implemented at Kuwait's borders. Post convened an EAC meeting on 28 February (Ref C) and has transmitted a draft warden notice to the Department for clearance. End Summary.

12. (U) Members of the Embassy's Avian Influenza Working Group (AIWG) met on 28 February with Ministry of Health (MOH) Assistant Under Secretary for Public Health Dr. Ali Al-Seif and Deputy Director for Public Health Dr. Yousef Mendkar to ascertain the current state of the AI outbreak in Kuwait, seek clarification of press statements on the Government's response, and discuss next steps. AIWG members present at the meeting included Econoff, Econ specialist, and Embassy and ARCENT medical officers.

13. (SBU) Al-Seif verified that the current number of confirmed cases in birds is 39. He said that among these there were about 16 falcons and smaller numbers of chickens and turkeys, none of which had been found on commercial farms. All tests were performed in Kuwaiti labs. He confirmed press reports that the GOK has closed the zoo and the bird market in Kuwait City, banned the sale of live poultry, and established separate hotlines to inform the public and receive reports of suspected cases. Al-Seif said he was unaware of any plans to restrict border traffic or of any concerns raised by governments of neighboring countries. (Note: The Resident DHS Advisor verified through Kuwait Customs that no new restrictions on cross-border traffic have been imposed. Pre-existing restrictions on the shipment of livestock remain. End note.) All public statements regarding avian flu are being channeled through MOH spokesman Dr. Ahmad Al-Shatti. Press releases have included useful

information about risks, symptoms, and precautions. Efforts by the GOK to be proactive in pushing out information seem, thus far, to be effective in reassuring the public and reducing panic and confusion.

¶4. (SBU) Al-Seif explained that the GOK response is being coordinated by an inter-ministerial committee which is chaired by the Minister of Health and includes representatives from the Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of the Interior, Kuwait Customs, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, and the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research. He said the committee, which normally meets monthly, had met several times since the first cases were confirmed on 25 February. Although Al-Seif said that the Minister of Health was in charge of coordinating the GOK response, he indicated that each of the agencies involved was operating autonomously while keeping the committee informed of steps taken.

(Comment: The Kuwait Minister of Health currently faces a potential vote of no-confidence following a parliamentary interpellation based on criticisms unrelated to avian flu (Ref B). With the no-confidence motion scheduled for a March 5 vote and rumors of the Minister's imminent resignation circulating in the press, it is unlikely that he is able to devote his full attention to avian flu response. End comment.)

¶5. (SBU) In responding to the AIWG's questions on measures taken to contain the spread of the virus among birds, Al-Seif said that the Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources (PAAAFR) had full responsibility for these measures. (Note: Over the past three days, Post has spoken several times by phone with Dr. Farida Al-Seif, Director of Animal Welfare at PAAAFR and is arranging a meeting with her to collect additional information. End note.) Al-Seif said

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MOH's role was limited to providing public health information and testing and treating humans. He confirmed that all humans known to have been in direct contact with infected birds (84 persons) had tested negative for the virus and have been administered Tamiflu as a prophylaxis. Al-Seif said he had enough Tamiflu in stock to support the entire population of Kuwait. (Comment: Post has serious doubts that the GOK has enough Tamiflu to support 3 million people, half of whom are not Kuwaiti citizens. In press statements, Al-Shatti said Kuwait has 5 million capsules. End comment.)

¶6. (SBU) AIWG concluded the meeting by offering whatever technical support and expert advice the GOK required. Al-Seif expressed his thanks and promised to keep the Embassy advised of developments.

¶7. (SBU) Post convened an EAC meeting on 28 February and decided to release a warden notice to advise the American community of: (1) the number and nature of the cases identified, (2) recommended precautions per the CDC and WHO websites, and (3) steps being undertaken by the GOK. A draft warden message has been sent to the Department for clearance.

¶8. (SBU) Embassy Kuwait's Medical Officer has been in contact with her counterparts at Embassy Baghdad to brief them on the latest avian flu developments in Kuwait.

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TUELLER